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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed four dyadic conversations for evidence of the signals operating in the turn-taking process and facilitating the smooth exchange of turns. It found over 20 syntactic, prosodic, and semantic features occurring frequently with turn-taking. The five most significant factors correlating with turn-taking were a prosodically completed sequence, a syntactically completed sequence, a semantically completed sequence, a loudness reduction, and a pause. Analysis of the findings revealed that about 87 percent of the turn-takings took place without any simultaneous talk, and of those, 95 percent occurred at a grammatical boundary. In two-thirds of the cases, the grammatical boundary was also combined with a step-down in loudness immediately before or after the pause. A step-up in loudness hardly occurred at all at turn ends, but a step-up in speed occurred in 15 percent, suggesting that increased speed at the end of a speaking turn is a way of tailing off or a way of protecting the turn. (MSE)

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# WHEN IS IT MY TURN TO SPEAK?

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# When is it my turn to speak?[1]

*Abstract.* A number of descriptive variables for impromptu speech are proposed. This study is concentrated on those signals that are correlated with turn-taking in spontaneous conversation. Turn-taking, it was found, takes place at a point in the discourse which represents a joint combination of a prosodically, syntactically, and semantically completed sequence, together called a grammatical boundary. Also, loudness reduction and/or pause were found to be present in about 2 cases out of 3.

## *Impromptu speech*

Granted that no simple and clear-cut definition of 'impromptu speech' can be arrived at, another approach to the problem would be to describe it with the help of a number of variables which together throw some light on its characteristic nature.

One type of impromptu speech, presumably also the most common use of language, is informal everyday conversation between friends and between husband and wife and other members of the family. Below, conversation has been contrasted with chairman-led debate; '+' means 'having more of' and '–' means 'having less of' the listed variables. It is an attempt to point at certain striking tendencies rather than describing the two kinds of speech events in black and while only. The list can, of course, be supplemented:

| | *Conversation* | *Debate* |
|---|---|---|
| • Private rather than public | + | – |
| • Casual and spontaneous (Not scripted or premeditated; planning and production are more or less simultaneous) | + | – |

| | *Conversation* | *Debate* |
|---|---|---|
| • Institutionalized (Formal setting; turn order, aim, length, and topic are specified in advance) | – | + |
| • Focus on the interaction (Facts are not always central) | + | – |
| • Freedom to introduce new topics | + | – |
| • Frequent use of 'tag questions' and 'intimacy signals' (*isn't it, you know*) | + | – |
| • Frequent use of 'listener reactions' (*m, yes, oh, that's right*) | + | – |

To sum up, conversation may be characterized as an informal speech event which is largely guided by the spontaneous wishes and interests of the participants and may occur for no other reason than to carry out social interaction. A debate, on the other hand, is a formal speech event which is highly task-oriented and is characterized by organisational efficiency.

*Turn-taking*

When two people want to communicate, thay are faced with what can be called a 'coordination problem'. In order to avoid constant clashes, they will have to synchronize their utterances. The adoption of such a convention will then work normatively, ie. they will try to adhere to it and will expect their partner to do the same. When such a convention has been widely accepted in a speech community, it can be referred to as 'standardized usage' (Cushman & Whiting 1972).

Linguistic interaction can be seen as recurrent switching from speaker to listener, from action to reaction, from foreground to background activity. This on-off characteristic, termed 'turn-taking', is not only one of the most obvious features of conversation but also a defining criterion of it; without turn-taking no conversation.

There is general agreement that two different types of utterances must be kept apart in a discussion of turn-taking. There is on the one hand the speaking-turn, an utterance that conveys new information and that expands the topic (Henne 1978). On the other hand, there are the back-channel items (Yngve 1970), which are the listener's brief reactions to the speaker's message supplying him with feedback and signalling attention, agreement, and various emotional reactions. The back-channel items are uttered by the listener while the speaker is having his turn and a few examples are *m, yes, OK, right, exactly, oh, good, I see, that's right*, etc. Without these listener reactions the speaker will sooner or later start wondering whether he is being listened to or not, whether the communicative contact has been discontinued. Such items are never picked up and commented on by the speaker but they greatly help to sustain the interaction. They can therefore be said to have a relatively low value on the 'content level' but a relatively high value on the 'relationship level' of communication, to use Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson's (1967, 51) terms. They are often also uttered with weaker or much weaker loudness than the person's normal (Orestrom 1977). Emission of a back-channel item does not represent an act of turn-taking but rather the opposite. It confirms that the person is still assuming the listener role without intending to take the floor.

How and where does then the exchange of speaking-turns take place and how does the listener know when it is his or her turn to speak? As speakers do not constantly collide but the listener manages to come in and take over with precision even in quick conversations (Jefferson 1973), he must be able to decide when the speaker has reached a point of completion. In other words, the listener is able to identify completed and non-completed stretches in the speaker's ongoing talk and quickly spot those points in the output which represent such completed sequences. It is here that turn-taking takes place. The fact that the listener is able to do this can be ascribed chiefly to two circumstances:

- the listener analyses the ongoing speech and makes inferences from the constraints that the gradual narrowing down of choices yields, information that he uses for setting up a 'running hypothesis' about the speaker's intended message

- the speaker puts out signals, verbal or non-verbal ones, intentionally or unintentionally, which further punctuate his completions and guide the listener in his search for points where it is relevant to take over.

It is the combination of these two circumstances, the listener's interpretation enabling anticipation of the intended message, and the speaker's signals, that makes it possible to enter with precision and recurrently execute well-timed turn-takings. The notion of a 'running hypothesis' was suggested by Kendon (1970), and the speaker signals have been studied by, in particular, Duncan (1972 and other studies).

*Aim, material, and method*

The aim of the present paper is to study the signals operating in the turn-taking process and facilitating smooth exchanges of turns.

The material used here consists of four dyadic (two-person) conversations from the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English. During the last two decades, this corpus has been recorded, transcribed, and supplied with a rich notation of prosodic and paralinguistic features at University College London. The basic prosodic entity is the 'tone unit', which is a stretch with a nuclear tone. (For a description of the corpus, see Svartvik & Quirk 1980, and for the analytic system, see Crystal 1969.) The corpus samples were tape-recorded and therefore contain no data on body language, a factor that has been found to show correlation with turn-taking. The conversations in my material can be described as informal talks between colleagues, friends, and between husband and wife, all of them British academics.

The present study is focussed on those points in the discourse where the listener took over the turn concentrating on the 'linguistic situation' prevailing at that very moment. What factors exist at and immediately before the transition from listener to speaker?

However, the prosodic and paralinguistic notations in the corpus are so many that all types could not possibly be included in this study. Here attention will be paid only to those which were found to occur with reasonable frequency with regard to turn-taking.

Despite this selection, there remained more than twenty different factors representing syntax, prosody, and semantics. These were fed into the computer for calculations.

*Results and discussion*

In the four conversations, there were in all 717 instances of turn-taking.[2] The vast majority of these (87%) took place without any simultaneous talk. These were made subject to further study. But before that, it was necessary to exclude the very short speaking-turns as they did not allow studies on speed and loudness variation properly. The turns that merely consisted of one single tone unit (8% of all turns in the present material) were therefore filtered off. Hence, the results below concern those turn-takings with no simultaneous talk involved and where the speaking-turn consists of two or more tone units.

Of all the coded factors, there were five that showed correlation with turn-taking. They were:

| | |
|---|---|
| Prosodically completed sequence | 96% |
| Syntactically completed sequence | 95% |
| Semantically completed sequence | 95% |
| Loudness reduction | 45% |
| Pause | 41% |

*Table 1.* The linguistic factors correlating with turn-taking.

By 'prosodically complete' is here meant a terminated tone unit. By 'syntactically complete' is meant a terminated sequence that is syntactically independent of a following sequence. It is often manifested as the end of a sentence. By 'semantically complete' is meant a terminated sequence that can be interpreted as fully rational. The combination of these three, together called a 'grammatical boundary', constitutes a major juncture in the speech output and serves as the central cue for the listener when he wants to take over. The following example shows one instance of turn-taking in which the grammatical boundary is present:[3]

B *I I'm not very good on · on mechanical language#*
*but one of the cylinders# might be just · missing a bit#*
*from the sound of it#*
A *well this is what I felt too# so one of the cylinders*
*missing* (continues) (S.4.1, tone units 397-402)

Further, almost every second instance of turn-taking was preceded by a step-down in loudness as regards the last few words of the speaker's turn. In the majority of all speaker-shifts there was no pause involved. Loudness reduction, starting before the grammatical boundary has turned up, may operate as a 'pre-signal' conveying the information that the speaking-turn will soon possibly be terminated. A pause following a grammatical boundary works additively and confirms that this boundary has actually turned up. For a listener interested in talking the floor, the grammatical boundary seems to serve as the primary cue whereas loudness reduction and pause seem to serve as secondary cues.

Fig. 1 presents the combination of the five factors given above:

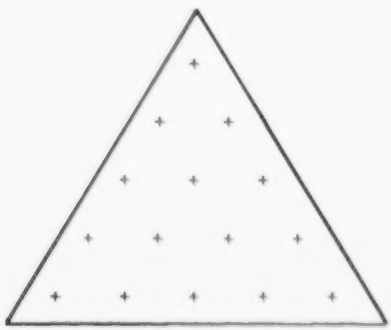

*Fig. 1.* The combinational distribution of the factors in Table 1.

The combination of three of the five factors existed in every third case of turn-taking. The three-factor combination was almost exclusively the grammatical boundary. The combination of four of the five factors was found in almost every second instance of transition.

From a somewhat different angle, a speaking-turn could be regarded as a multi-dimensional message whose various dimensions are like 'pulses' or 'waves' with peaks and troughs (Fig. 2). The converging and diverging waves could then be seen as stretches along these dimensions, which, when having reached a trough position, have also reached a completion on that dimension (eg. a trough on the prosodic dimension corresponds to a completed tone unit). After that, the wave can only continue by taking a new direction, which means that a new sequence is then begun. When the waves cooccur in a trough, this could be called a 'hit' (circled in the figure) and this hit represents a point of possible completion of the turn.

*Fig. 2.* The speaking-turn seen as a message with multi-dimensional waves.

When the speaker displays those signals, the listener can never be fully certain that he actually intends to finish. He may want to continue. But what the listener will know is that the speaker has reached a point of possible completion and it is towards these possible completions that the listener orients himself when he wants to take over. There is also, of course, an option for the listener upon the display of these signals. He can choose to take over or to remain listener (with the obvious exception when a question is put to him). To use a term in Enkvist's article (this volume), a hit makes up a 'decision point' for the listener.

A closer look was also taken at speed and loudness variation in the turn on the basis of the notations in the material. The beginning (= first tone unit) and end (= last tone unit) of every turn was studied with respect to such variations:

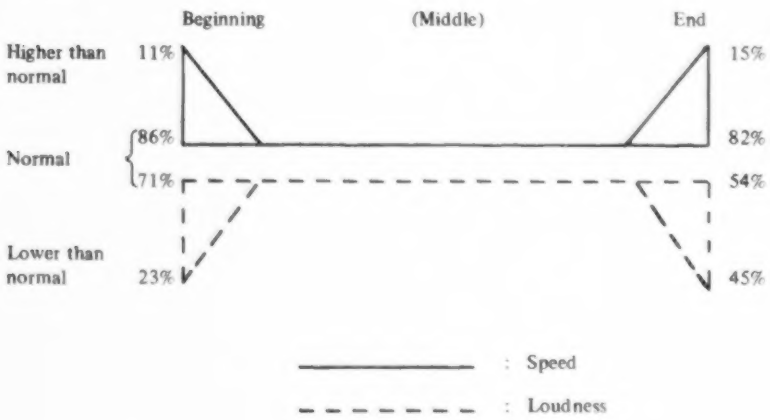


*Fig. 3.* Speed and loudness variation within the speaking-turns.

It can be seen that a person generally started with his normal speed and loudness and finished with his normal speed. But as we saw earlier, about every second time he reduced his loudness towards the end. The observation that he speeded up towards the end in 15% of all cases deserves a comment. I can see two possible explanations to this. It could either mean that the speaker after having delivered the essential part of his message ('body'), has only got additional and less important information ('tail') to present and therefore does this in a quicker manner thereby indicating that he is about to yield the turn. The other possibility would be that the speaker, when realizing that the partner has understood or anticipated the intended message ("I know that you know"), speeds up in order to finish before the other enters.

Finally, Crystal (1969, 151) mentions a phenomenon that he calls 'descending' and which refers to a gradual descent stretching over a series of tone units. "Usually the . . . descent takes place in a series of stages, each

stage being coextensive with a tone unit within the utterance." This tendency of pitch to drift down-wards over one or more intonation groups where each intonational peak is lower than the preceding one could be illustrated as in Fig. 4:

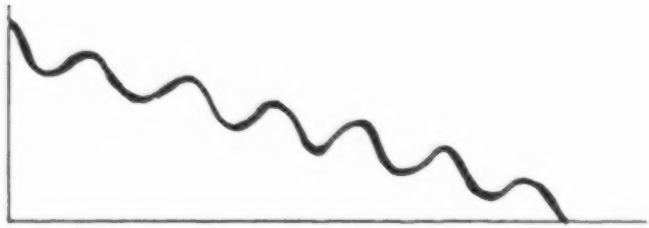

*Fig. 4.* The downdrift effect.

The downdrift effect has been observed, not only in English, but also in newscasts in Finland-Swedish (Enkvist & Nordström 1978). However, the downdrift effect was found to be a typical of spontaneous conversation.

*Conclusion*

Suggestions have been given for some relevant variables as regards a description of impromptu speech. In the material studied, five factors were found to show correlation with turn-taking: completion of a prosodic, syntactic, and semantic sequence whose joint completion constitutes a major juncture in the speech output called a grammatical boundary. The remaining two factors are loudness reduction and pause. About 87% of all turn-takings took place without any simultaneous talk and of these, 95% occurred at a grammatical boundary. In two cases out of three the grammatical boundary was also combined with a step-down in loudness immediately before and/or a pause. Step-up in loudness hardly existed at all at turn ends whereas a step-up in speed occurred as 15% in such positions. It is proposed that increased speed at the end of the speaking-turn is either a way of tailing off or a way of 'protecting' the turn.

NOTES

[1] This study consists of selected parts from my forthcoming doctoral thesis titled 'Turn-Taking and Interruption in Face-to-Face Conversation'. It is based on the London-Lund Corpus lodged in the files of the Survey of Spoken English, University of Lund, a project supported by The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation and Knut and Alice Wallenberg's Foundation.

[2] The conversations are S.1.1, S.1.4, S.1.6, and S.4.1. The conversations are approximately 20-30 minutes long.

[3] '#' = tone unit boundary, '.' = brief pause.

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